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Post 2/11/75

Helms and the Hoover Empire

When he was director of the Central Intelligence Agency, Richard Helms called officially from time to time on J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI. This was for Helms a singularly frustrating experience.

For 45 minutes of their hour-long appointment, Hoover lectured him on the nature of the Communist threat. In the last 10 or 15 minutes Helms tried to present whatever the problem was he wanted to discuss.

In the murky depths of the intelligence apparatus no relationship was stranger than that between Helms and Hoover, who presided over the FBI like a Byzantine despot. If the congressional committees preparing to explore the intelligence underworld are to do a serious job they must examine this relationship. I believe it can throw considerable light on the charges of domestic spying by the CIA.

Hoover's concept of communism was quite out of date. It took no account of radical groups such as the Weathermen and the black militants. The Hoover view of the Communist peril went back to the early '20s and the '30s and the threat of subversion by contact with the agents of Moscow. This was a view as naive as that of the cartoon anarchist ready to hurl an old fashioned bomb.

Hoover was busy consolidating his empire with secret reports on almost everyone in public life. "Hoover Kept Files on Members of Congress." That recent headline advertised a fact at least 25 years old. Except for a few favorites always ready to do his bidding,

he had carefully compiled data on virtually everyone in the capital.

His file on Lyndon Johnson was said to have been a foot thick. It went back to the former President's earliest days in Washington as a congressional assistant and later as a member of the House. The President missed no opportunity to fawn over Hoover, praising him as the guardian of the nation's morals and the protector of our security.

Bugging the room in the Willard Hotel that Martin Luther King occupied at the time of the great peaceful "I-have-a-dream" march, Hoover added the tapes of that bug to the voluminous King file. One of the few times when he dropped the mask of the despot was in a later confrontation with King whom he denounced as a hypocrite and a fraud.

There were many who saw the danger in Hoover's despotic power but more often than not they were afraid to speak out. The reach of blackmail was considerable given the extent of the FBI's inquiry into every aspect of an individual's private life.

That this had become a grave threat to democratic freedoms was undeniable. But at the same time the preoccupation with dragnet surveillance and Hoover's total domination of the FBI seem to have weakened the capacity of the agency to track down lawbreakers and particularly young terrorists ready to use any means to try to break the system. That the FBI has been seriously impaired recent events bear out.

Of the nine bombings or attempted

bombings of federal buildings, including the Capitol and the State Department, no single suspect has been apprehended. Patricia Hearst was kidnapped and went underground a year ago and is reportedly at large with two survivors of the Symbionese Liberation Army. Yet the FBI has found no trace of her. Their excuse is that the public is so turned off against all law enforcement officers that informants are impossible to find.

Here is an immediate challenge to the new Attorney General Edward H. Levi. It may have been too much to expect Hoover's successor, Clarence Kelley, a police chief from Kansas City, to revolutionize the time consuming and often futile procedures of the bureau in a few months and with a limited mandate.

Helms' comprehension of the radical threat was far broader than that of Hoover. It is conceivable that understanding the connection between terrorists in this country and the influence of extremists abroad, he may have sought to run down the ties between them. Could this constitute domestic spying?

I say this not in Helms' defense but to suggest that the coming investigation should follow what is certain to be a tortuous path in search of the truth and consequences of a time of plots and counter-plots that in any reasonable light have a weirdly unreal look. The headlines of condemnation proliferate. As the congressional investigators will discover, objective truth is harder to come by.